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ABSTRACT

The methods used to assign grades to students have long been of concern to teachers. Traditional approaches to solving the difficulties have centered on norm-referenced and criterion-referenced evaluations. A promising alternative arises when criterion-referenced evaluation is linked with contract grading. A student may contract with a teacher to do the work required for any passing grade from "A" to "D." The process may be handled in one of several ways: the teacher may create and assign the contract; the teacher may create several contracts and allow the student to choose the preferred one; the student may create the contract with the teacher's agreement and assistance; or the student may create the contract with the teacher allowing classroom time to pursue the endeavor and providing needed assistance. Contract grading relieves anxiety over grades, helps the student see the required work as a whole unit, and sustains motivation. (TJ)

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# CONTRACTS MOVE FROM COMMERCE TO THE CLASSROOM

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."

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The task of assigning grades seems as inevitable a consequence of working in the teaching profession as low salaries and seeing too few students per class break through the ignorance barrier. Just as instructors are dissatisfied with the current status of salaries and level of student preparations for the course they are teaching, instructors are dissatisfied with current methods of evaluation. In 1960 Robert F. Oliver discussed the "Eternal and (Infernal) Problem of Grades"[1] and many teachers in 1978 still consider grading to be an continuing problem. A survey of Volume 27 (1977) of the Education Index showed 50 articles examining the problem of assigning grades to students.

In working toward a solution to the grading problem, the author has looked at past successes and mistakes, examining how others assign grades by comparision with her own grading procedures. Traditional efforts to solve the eternal and infernal problem have clustered around two approaches to grading, norm-referenced and criterion-referenced evaluation. Working definitions of those two approaches are in order.

Norm-referenced measurement evaluates a student's progress among classmates. When teachers approach the problem of grading armed with the Bell curve and the various statistical methodologies designed to predict means and medians, deviations and ultimately grades, they are utilizing norm-referenced strategies.

Problem arise for accurate statistical analysis when class sizes are small. The author also observed an interesting phenomenon in regard to competition. Students tended to compare rates and amounts of work and to drift toward a lower common denominator. Old habits die

hard, so there would usually be one or two rate breakers who would encounter grumbles and groans from classmates when they pulled the top edge of the curve higher than hoped for by those on the fringes of the center.

A similar phenomenon has been observed with pass/fail systems: students tended to do the minimum amount of work required to avoid failure. Students also appeared to be confused by the lack of information as to what were acceptable levels of performance.[2]

In addition to norm-referenced measurement, instructors often use a form of criterion-referenced measurement when student speeches and/or papers are evaluated according to a set criterion. This standard may be entirely in the head or the instructor or may be written down on paper. Student work is compared to a model which usually has a letter grade attached to it. Criterion-referenced measurement can best be defined as an evaluation which is based on examining the student's progress with respect to some specified performance standard. Students no longer compete with peers, but rather with themselves and the standard. To facilitate measurement and to avoid confusion as to what was to be learned, when and to what level of competency, many instructors, the author included, have begun to use learning/behavioral objectives in the classroom.

Once the author instituted learning objectives, grading was based on the criterion-based model. No longer when the highest grade is 80 out of 100 does that constitute the "A" grade. Since students are given copies of the learning objectives, they are familiar with what is to be learned and at what level of proficiency and how that learning is to be demonstrated.

Along with the criterion-based model, the author has developed a grading system that is based on contracts. This experience has been evolutionary over the past six years, and some do's and don'ts regarding grade contracts are included in this discussion.

Grading contracts model themselves on the real world where we regularly make agreements or contracts which have the force of law. Having a driveway resurfaced is an example of a contract. The consumer agrees to pay a certain amount of dollars for a particular service. If the contractee is alert, the contract will specify conditions and what quality of service is acceptable before payment will be rendered; otherwise, there may be a half inch of asphalt rather than the expected two inches on the driveway. Similarly, a grade contract is a written agreement between student and instructor that stipulates the work the student will do and the grade he or she can expect if the work is satisfactory. Contracts can be used for evaluating a single project or the entire course. Contracts are separate from, but usually related to, the course syllabus in which requirements for the course are spelled out in terms of tests, reading projects, speeches and attendance. The contract will specify what work and level of proficiency is required for a given grade. For example, an "A" grade might require no more than three cuts in attendance, participation in three groups, presentation of a short report on some aspect of the group's experience and the keeping of a journal which might speak to various aspects of theories of interpersonal communication. All students who fulfill given requirements, receive the appropriate contracted grade.

Contracts can be set up a number of different ways, depending upon the degree of involvement of the instructor and student in

determining the content of the contract. William Christen, in Educational Technology, suggests the use of a plan that involves a four-fold use of student contracts.

1. Alternative One: Teacher-Made, Teacher-Assigned Contract. 'In this contract, the teacher decides the amount of work to be assigned for each contract and the amount of time allowed to complete the contract. One common use of this type of contract is to set up a series of three contracts that vary in degree of difficulty.' . . . and corresponds to three levels of evaluation, A, B and C. The student then decides which on 'he will pursue and, with the teacher, agrees to the content of the contract.'

2. Alternative Two: Teacher-Made, Student-Assigned Contract. 'In this contractual scheme, the teacher develops a bank of contracts which are given to the students, who then make a decision as to which contract they will do. In this situation, more than three alternatives are given. The student then can have a large range of alternatives. Again, degrees of difficulty should be built into these contracts, and they should be pointed out to the students.'

3. Alternative Three: Student-Made, Teacher-Agreement Contract. 'In this contractual scheme, the student identifies an area of 'weakness' for himself within the topic being pursued by the class. He decides what he wants to do and then checks it out with the teacher, who will assist. The teacher helps to decide the appropriateness of the task and helps the student modify the plan if necessary.'

4. Alternative Four: Student-Made Contract. 'In this contractual scheme, the student decides what he wants to do, writes up the contract on a form which may or may not be provided by the teacher. The teacher's role in this process is simply to allow the student classroom time to pursue this endeavor and to be available for assistance if the need arises.'[3]

The contract should include: 1) the name of the student and the date when the contract was signed; 2) the objectives, the tasks and the nature of the tasks to be completed; 3) provisions of the contract, the amount and to what level of competency and how the completion of such tasks is to be demonstrated (by test, speech, project, etc.); 4) the due date; 5) signatures of both student and professor; 6) an

evaluation section where an instructor can comment upon the completed works and assign a grade. It is useful to do this in duplicate, so both the student and instructor have copies. Contracts may also have some built in flexibility so that the student can alter the contract. For example, the author allows students in The Psychology of Communication who have contracted for a "B" and done less than "B" work on one of two written exams, thus not meeting the requirements for a "B," to regain that "B" by writing a research paper. The nature of the course and what can be substituted will determine how flexible contracts can be. For example, it is not likely that an instructor would permit a student who has been absent the entire semester from participation in group experiences to recoup his/her losses by writing a paper on group experiences during exam week.

One of the first things learned in using contracts is that there must be some control on quality as well as quantity of work. Level of proficiency as well as amount of work must be included in a contract. The first time the author used a project to differentiate "A" from "B" work, projects were not all "A" quality work. Some controls are now used in that papers and projects have to be completed early to be read and returned with suggestions for improvement for papers that do not come up to "A" level work. This has proved to be a learning experience for those who choose to rework the papers and have provided a means of quality control. Students who do not rewrite their papers drop to a lower grade level.

All grading systems are somewhat Skinnerian in their point of view equating the grade with the stimulus and the student's effort towards that grade as the response. The traditional assumption has been

that all students are motivated in the same way by high grades and that the grades "B," "C," and "D" are given for degrees of falling short of the "A" goal. A grade contract is no less Skinnerian, but allows the student to determine what level of competency and involvement he or she wishes to achieve. For example, a student may take physics in college and find him/herself involved in the struggle for an "A," when all that the student really wants to do and know about physics is on a "C" level. Often there is no way to determine whether to achieve a "C" attendance at labs or participation in class to lose or gain that "C." The student may dutifully, but not cheerfully, attend those labs. How much happier lab partners, the student and the instructor might be if lab attendance is designated for those who seek "A" and "B" grades.

With grade contracts, the instructor may designate levels of competency. Greater cognitive skill is needed to design a communication model or to apply an existing model than to replicate a model from the textbook. Consequently, a grading contract should reflect that. A student working for an "A" would be expected to be on the higher levels of cognition and be able to evaluate or synthesize a given theory of behavior. A student working for a "B" might be expected to be able to describe and compare two models. Consequently, the contract should specify for the student not only the amount of work required, but the level of competency expected for a given grade.

Contracts have been used by the author for six years in the teaching of group discussion, interpersonal communication and the psychology of communication at Alfred University and Old Dominion University and will continue to be used in the classroom for the following reasons: 1) they ease students' anxiety over grades;

2) they help students to see the required work as a whole unit; 3) they facilitate record-keeping, so that the student can determine what his/her grade is any given time; 4) they clarify student planning and decision making in regard to levels of commitment to the course (why should everyone's time be spent on projects required for an "A" if all the student wants is a "C?"); 5) they involve both the student and the instructor in a consideration of criteria for each grade level; 6) they standardize criteria for grading for everyone in the course and 7) they can provide consistency over time as the course is offered, particularly if the same contracts are offered in multiple sections. No longer will students rush to get in the section that has no written tests.

Students in the author's classes have overwhelmingly favored contracts. The most frequent comments are that the system is more fair and less anxiety producing, provides motivation and permits better budgeting of time than does more conventional systems of grading. Students most frequently contract for high grades, although occasionally they do contract for "C" and "D" grades. Probably 40% of those who contract for "A's" fail to meet the requirements and recontract for a "B." It appears that the students initially perceive that contracting means an easy grade. Students are also conditioned to traditional study methods. When tests are given, students know which of the behavioral objectives are to be covered. Even though the objectives limit the material to be covered, students tend to spend time rereading material not covered by the exams and are surprised when the test covers exactly what was promised.

Research into the use of contracts for grading is not conclusive,

for there has been no consistency in the coupling of grade contracts and criterion-referenced grading. Contracts can also be made integral to individualized learning, or combined with programmed instruction packages.

Dennis Warner and Toshio Akamine (Washington State University) found that students in education classes reacted favorably to the use of contracts and felt that their strengths lay in the areas of providing direction, acquiring feelings of success, profiting from errors without being penalized for them and promoting feelings of mutual repsect and trust between students and teachers. Criticism centered around the flexibility of the system, particularly since students were able to select only predefined assignments rather than being able to initiate projects of their own original design. Students also felt that where assignments were judged either as satisfactory of unsatisfactory, quantity of work was emphasized at the expense of quality.[4] Both these problems are inherent in the way contracts are set up as opposed to the idea of contracts and could be corrected by including students in the planning and by a different method of evaluating students' work.

An enthusiastic report on contracts comes from R. M. Barlow (University of Wisconsin at Stout) who used contracts for a course in philosophical ethics. Students and professor jointly contracted to determine the objectives and the activities and evidence which would be used to determine if objectives had been met. He found greater involvement and sense of personal challenge, more acceptance of personal responsibility for getting the task completed, a more organized approach to the semester's work and greater rapport between teacher and student due in part to the contracting and negotiating sessions, but also due to

the instructor being viewed as a facilitator of learning rather than a demanding taskmaster. Students were also able to sustain motivation, were more creative and found greater relevance of the course content because they had had a hand in the course design.[5] In an experiment with nine business administration classes involving 280 students and where two of the classes were used as controls, Professors Polczynski and Shirland found a significant increase in motivation and increased effort by students to reach the contracted goals.[6] Professor Raymond who used learning contracts for history survey courses at Ohio State University in Mansfield found that students both learned more and performed better.[7] Professor Delworth (Colorado State University) found a positive response and anxiety reduction among students in courses taught by student personnel services' workers who used contracts.[8] Empire State College of the State University of New York, where students devise their own degree program, uses a contract system which specifies the activities to be undertaken for a specific study, the criteria for evaluation of the work and the amount of credit to be granted upon satisfactory completion of the contract. Empire State College has found contracts to be an effective way of providing an individualized approach to learning for students receiving college credit for work and life experiences.[9]

Certain researchers have been less affirmative in reporting the effect of contract grading. Research done at the University of Tennessee showed that in comparisons between two groups of students in a course in educational psychology that the group using contracts favored the experimental group as a method of grading only slightly more than those in the group graded by traditional methods of grading.[10] This same

attitude, positive, but not enthusiastic, was discovered in another study of students in an education course at Washington State. The author, Hugh Taylor, does note that students perceived the contracts as being a fair method of grading and suggests the "new procedures most inevitably generate resistance. The grade contract is no exception. The results . . . offer a basis for optimism . . . on the part of the students sampled."[11]

A study done with 182 students in a college of business found resistance on the part of students, for although performance was improved by contract grading, student reactions to the course and to the instructor were significantly more negative than those students raught by the same instructor using traditional grading techniques. This led the authors to recommend that "despite their decreasing ineffectiveness" traditional forms of grading should be used by instructors who fear adverse student evaluations.[12]

Since the study at the University of Tennessee and an unnamed college of business did not use learning objectives, and the nature of the contract was not spelled out in the study, it could be that the experimental group experienced a traditional grading system dressed up as a new innovative system. Obviously the effectiveness of contracts is difficult to judge when the conditions under which they are used vary.

Many speech instructors report favorable experiences. Sara Stelzner, writing about the use of grade contracts in public speaking courses at the University of Massachusetts, concludes that contracts encourage instructors to clarify standards and students to become more involved in setting goals and taking responsibility for their own learning.

She states that ". . . contract grading is well worth the time it takes to prepare and administer."[13] Cassandra Book, who uses contracts in teaching interpersonal communication, found that contracting exemplified some of the very same areas in which a course in interpersonal is trying to facilitate. Contracts promoted greater cooperation between student and professor, worked towards supportive communication in that it implemented "climates of greater equality, provisionalism, description, objectivity, personal involvement and problem orientation."[14] Andrew and Darlyn Wolvin have used contracts for the course in technical speech communication and found that students feel more confident and more in control of their investment of time and abilities in the course. They conclude that "While contract grading is not the panacea for all educational ills, it is an effective strategy for individualizing instruction and motivating students in the learning process."[15]

It appears that most users of contract grading are aware that some refinements and situational adjustments need to be made to improve the functioning of contract grading, but would agree that it is a viable alternative to our traditional systems of grading.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Robert T. Oliver, "The Eternal and (Infernal) Problem of Grades," Speech Teacher, IX (January, 1960), 8-11.

[2]William A. Poppin and Charles L. Thompson, "The Effect of Grade Contracts on Student Performance," Journal of Educational Research, 64 (May-June, 1971), 420.

[3]William Christen, "Contracting for Student Learning," Educational Technology, XVI (March, 1976), 27.

[4]Dennis A. Warner and Toshio Akamini, "Student Reactions to College Grade Contracts," Education Forum, 36 (March, 1972), 389-91.

[5]R. M. Barlow, "An Experiment with Learning Contracts," Journal of Higher Education, XLV (June, 1974), 446-48.

[6]James J. Polczynski and L. E. Shirland, "Expectancy Theory and Contract Grading Combined as an Effective Motivational Force for College Students," Journal of Educational Research, 70 (May-June, 1977), 240-41.

[7]Allan R. Raymond, "The Contract as Alternative," The Social Studies, LXVI (March/April, 1975), 54-55.

[8]Ursula Delworth, "The Contract System: Students as Participants in the Grading Process," Journal of College Student Personnel, 14 (May, 1973), 277.

[9]Dychman W. Vermilye (ed.), Life Long Learner: A New Clientele for Higher Education (San Francisco: Jossey Base Publishers, 1974), 56; Also Virginia Pierce and A. Nancy Avakian, "Music Appreciation," Adult Leadership, 25 (May, 1977), 266.

[10]Poppin and Thompson, 420.

[11]Hugh Taylor, "Student Reaction to the Grade Contract," The Journal of Educational Research, 64 (March, 1971), 313.

[12]Gene E. Burton, Dew S. Pathek, and David S. Burton, "Effects of Contract Grading on Student Evaluations of Teachers," Educational Horizons, 55 (Spring, 1977), 132.

[13]Sara Latham Stelzner, "A Case for Contract Grading," The Speech Teacher, 24 (March, 1975), 132.

[14]Cassandra Book, "Contract Grade in the Interpersonal Communication Course," The Speech Teacher, 24 (March, 1975), 134 Gives a sample of interpersonal communication unit contract complete with sample objectives.

[15]Andrew D. Wolvin and Darlyn R. Wolvin, "Contract Grading in Technical Speech Communication," The Speech Teacher, 24 (March, 1975), 142.